A Desire for Immersion: The Panorama to the Oculus Rift

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Abstract

The paper argues that the experience of viewing 360° historical scenes, either within the "real" environment of the panorama or contemporary "virtual" environments, arises in part from the attraction of the affecting experience. Tracing a line from ancient Greece and Rome through to contemporary technological innovations in Virtual Reality, we explore an idea that what links all of these experiences is not solely a response to social, political or historical streams but a manifestation of a pan-historical human desire for the Dionysiac.

Using texts by theorists as diverse as Nietzsche, Baudrillard, Rheingold, Gibson and Shaviro, we suggest that the impetus for viewing historical scenes within 360° environments is at least partly involved in wanting to go beyond spectatorship and intellectual curiousity, towards presence and intoxication. Attempts to tease out the ideological content of an immersive experience must be done in the context of the craving of audience members for the sensual, the sensational, the being present, and other "illegitimate" forms of impetus to view and experiences. These always already exist alongside and perhaps even before the more legitimate goals of gaining knowledge, historical perspective, education and information.

Charlton and Moar explore the idea that this desire for immersion impels us to submerge ourselves in historical scenes. Thus immersion is the link between panoramas and new panoramic experiences afforded by new technologies such as the Oculus Rift.

Much has been written about the cultural, political and historical content of Panoramas, with excellent work being published on the history of their development, exhibition, popularity and decline, as well as their cultural and ideological meaning. However, in this paper we will attempt to come at the subject from different angle, concentrating on affects which may be felt during the viewing of Panoramas, and furthermore suggest that these are common to contemporary 360° viewing experiences. We propose to excavate a link between these affects and that experience which Nietzsche describes as the "Dionysiac". In doing so, we echo the aspiration of that stream of contemporary cultural theory which concentrates on the affect of the encounter with the artistic or cultural artefact. This is epitomised in Shaviro's ambition to see movies not as *texts* to be *read* but rather considered in a way which "foregrounds visceral, affective responses (…) in contrast to most critics' exclusive concern with issues of form, meaning, and ideology. Film is a vivid medium, and it is important to talk about how it arouses corporeal reactions of desire and fear, pleasure and disgust, fascination and shame" (Shaviro, 1993: viii). Here we suggest that the same might be done with 360° experiences such as the Panoramic painting and 360° VR enabled by the Oculus Rift headset.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche identifies:

...the nature of the Dionysiac, most immediately understandable to us in the analogy of intoxication. Under the influence of the narcotic potion hymned by all primitive men and peoples, or in the powerful approach of spring, joyfully penetrating the whole of nature, those Dionysiac urges are awakened and as they grow more intense, subjectivity becomes a complete forgetting of the self (Nietzsche and Tanner, 1993: 17).

It is an experience beyond the usual bounds of socialized behaviour and feeling, entered into at moments of religious ecstasy, of drunkenness, of sexual abandon, and at the most powerful performances of music and drama: "At one time, therefore, the spectators of tragedy themselves became Dionysian creatures and, as such, temporarily incapable of proper social activity" (May, 1990: 15). This is an experience which is somewhat inimical to the maintenance of a civilised society – "The Dionysian state cannot be sustained, since its continuance must entail bestial apathy or self-destruction" (Ibid.).

How is this extreme and intoxicated state relevant to that refined, post-Enlightenment form, the Panorama? Panoramas are often studied and written about in terms of their link with Enlightenment values, as having civilising, educational and improving qualities; the epitome of a certain bourgeois tendency in Art and the wider society from which the Panoramas grew (Oettermann, 1997: 5-49 *passim*). Yet if we look at some early accounts of audience reaction to visiting panoramas, the language used often exceeds what one might expect from a dry, essentially academic experience. Visitors experienced physical sensations a “feeling of giddiness (…) is simulated in the panorama" (Ibid: 13). Contemporary accounts allude to some of the startling affects experienced at the viewing of Panoramas - “a great many "ladies with delicate nerves" and "young dandies" became seasick at the first exhibitions.” (Ibid: 13). The correspondent from German magazine wrote enthusiastically of a Panorama of Brighton - "Oh! If I could only recreate for you the impression this vanishing counterfeit made upon me again! After climbing various sets of stairs you suddenly emerge in the centre of Brighton, on the stretch of green lawn called "The Steyne". (…) But oh, the sea as a whole! It is beyond the power words! You must *see* this sea…" (Ibid.: 106). Such affects could be increased when music accompanied the viewing:

As it happened, someone was playing the organ downstairs in Whigley's, when a great many ladies go with their children. The music was symphonic, and the organist pulled out the timpani and trumpet stops, creating the impression of an entire orchestra. It noticeably heightened of the painting on all present; we were hearing the trumpets of war and found ourselves transported to the scene of the action (Ibid.: 119).

Oestermann himself assents that even a present day visit to extant panorama can have very powerful affects:

…a visit to one of the few surviving panoramas shows that the effect can be overwhelming. Entering from a busy street, visitors grope their way along a dark subterranean corridor and climb the spiral staircase (being turned in circles like a blindfolded child about to play a game at a birthday party). Suddenly they emerge to find themselves transported to a far away place, as if by magic. Nowhere is it possible for the eye to shift "outside the frame" and compare the artistic allusion with the real surroundings. After a few minutes, when the memory of the city outside

has begun to fade and the eyes have become accustomed to the twilight inside of the rotunda, visitors can easily believe they are looking from a pavilion on top of a small hill at a landscape receding on all sides into a distant haze (Ibid.: 51).

This is not entirely removed from St Theresa of Avila's ecstatic proclamation "It sometimes happened to me in this kind of prayer that I was so taken out of myself that I didn't know whether I was dreaming or whether the glory I was experiencing was indeed occurring" (Teresa of Avila, Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, 2008: 112).

The sense of being taken out of oneself and caught up in an affecting experience has very often been reported as an intrinsic part of the overall experience of visiting a Panorama. These accounts of intense encounters with Panoramas are akin to Shaviro's account of an intense viewing of an impactful film, which "dissolves the contours of the ego and transgresses the requirements of coherence and closure that govern "normal" experience" (Shaviro, 1993: 54). Baudrillard writes about one of the Panorama's precursors, the trompe l'oeil, creating

...a tactile vertigo that recounts the subject's insane desire to obliterate his own image and therefore vanish. For reality grips us only when we lose ourselves in it, or when it reappears as our own hallucinated death (Baudrillard, 1990: 62).

Dionysian destruction of the self indeed. "Thus, through this gulf of oblivion, the worlds of the everyday and Dionysiac become separated" (Nietzsche and Tanner, 1993: 39).

This desire to be taken out of oneself and one's everyday world, to immerse oneself in that which is *death* to the everyday self, is present in many events involving recreational spectatorship, from fine art to freak show, from cinema to gaming and indeed from the panoramas to 360° VR. All of these may heighten a sense of immersion, or *presence*.

The idea of a sense of *presence* has become a key idea in the critical commentaries on the experience of new forms of digital representation afforded by new technologies. These endeavour to develop a closer association between ourselves and digital visual representations and have been emerging gradually over the last 50 years. The most noteworthy for the purposes of this discussion is, of course, Virtual Reality itself (Rheingold, 1992), in which users are presented, often through the use of a headset, with a simulated digital environment. The affect on the user is often described as enhancing the sense of *presence*: the feeling of actually being present in the simulated scene (Sheridan, 1992).

The novelty of these new 360° representations may offer a similarly ecstatic taste of the Dionysiac to that experienced by the visitors to Panoramas of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is notable that the same masking of the sensational aspects of contemporary 360° VR by appeals to its educational, utilitarian and civilizing value (e.g. Muscott and Gifford, 1994) is prevalent, as with the Panorama. But again, it is important to emphasise the affects of the

experience as an integral aspect. Gibson (1984) explored this in narrative form, using the term 'Cyberspace' to describe the visualisation of complex information and networks within which people can experience *emotions* as well as develop ideas.

It is important not to conflate the notion of *presence* with the Dionysiac. Whilst there is some overlap between the state of being present in a simulated scene and the sense of being overwhelmed in the Dionysiac state, they are not exactly the same. The way that *presence* is experienced in a 360° VR environment - using a headset - isolates the subject from the everyday world and may therefore assist in achieving the Dionysiac. Yet it also might be true to say that the intrusive and novel aspects of using these technologies can serve to remind the spectator that it is *not* the everyday world that they are experiencing; the novelty might work against the sense that one is "really" elsewhere. This may particularly be the case if the virtual world has interactive elements, which may demand a rational response – "what do I do now?"

This is an important consideration; in that interactivity is something that new technologies can offer in extending the panoramic experience. For example, hand held devices, such as smart phones, can allow viewers to see additional information that relates to particular elements within a panorama. Fig 1 shows an example of such *Augmented Reality,* in this case showing how details of an exhibit at a virtual exhibition can be added to a scene. Of course, the use of headsets with such virtual exhibits are also possible and also offer the possibility of viewing a panorama from a remote location.

Figure 1: Providing gaze and context specific information for panoramic video. (Chok 2015).

Such augmentation and overlaid information, can clearly add to the viewers experience. As noted previously, the cognitive load of attending to this information may be a disruptive to the sense of immersion. However, viewing an interactive panorama is a complex experience, and a variety of factors, including the diegisis of the interactive elements, narrative flow and the complexity of the depicted environment, may mitigate against this disruption (Madigan, 2015).

This is perhaps true of all our experiences of the Dionysiac through any media – the feeling is always fleeting and we are ever drawn back into the everyday world of meaning, measure, unit and historical sense. Yet we hope that we have given a sense that there is this other aspect, which is present as much in the experience of older forms of 360° experiences as contemporary ones.

One famous piece of ancient Roman art ties together the themes of 360° media, presence and the Dionysiac together. This intriguing very early example, so apposite for the present discussion, is described by Grau (2003: 25) who notes that in Room five of the Villa dei Misteri at Pompeii, there exists The Great Frieze. "This spectacular painted scene almost entirely fills the observer's field of vision…It is a chamber dedicated to the cult of Dionysius, used by his followers for rites of initiation and ritual." He observes that the whole image is not sequenced temporally, but "as a spatial and temporal unity…which seeks to meld the observer partially with the mythical scene" (Ibid.: 27).

When we explore the phenomena of the panorama, and think about how to position existing panoramas with contemporary audiences, we should always bear the sensational affects and the sense of losing oneself, the Dionysian quality of the experience, in mind. Whilst not losing sight of the improving and intellectual delights of these media experiences, which we should also echo Nietzsche by acknowledging to be the Apollonian, let us not forget the darker, less respectable but perhaps more thrilling aspects.

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